An Art Therapy Approach To Behavior Modification

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Introduction

Special education students often have a difficult time remaining on task and determining appropriate social skills. This creates a need for the teacher to dedicate valuable instruction time to address behavioral management. Because the majority of subjects taught throughout the day tap into a students logical thinking side of the brain, many students do not get to utilize their emotional and imaginative responses. Therefore, the classroom environment is not nurturing the learning needs of special education students. Art therapy has been shown to serve as a vehicle for developmental learning, which can impact the spirit and emotional response of a child. Art therapy has been studied (1997-2011) to prove its usefulness as a catalyst for creative expression, social development and ability to aid in problem solving. Unfortunately, budget cuts have greatly reduced the amount of arts instruction within schools and students are receiving little to no exposure to the arts and its benefits. If art can be integrated into more lessons throughout the day, then perhaps we can determine if art is an effective tool for engaging students and modifying behavior.

Statement of the Problem

For first grade students at PSX, the curriculum map allows for very limited arts exposure. The students are most often engaged in a critical thinking or writing task, utilizing their logical thinking skills. However, many students will special needs such as ADHD or Autism have difficult time remaining on task and staying focused. When these children are engaged in art activities, their level of focus greatly increases along with their eagerness to learn. If more subjects were taught through the perspective of an art activity, then perhaps students will remain on task and show behavior improvement.

Review of Related Literature

Art therapy has gained wide acceptance as a modality that uses the nonverbal language of art for personal growth, insight and transformation. Art therapy practices can be implemented in a variety of settings including hospitals, schools, shelters and community institutions. Various studies (Freilich & Shectman, 2010; Henley, 1998, 1998; Nisenson, 2008) have been conducted to investigate the contribution of art therapy to the social and academic behaviors of students in the elementary grades. Play and artistic expression are commonly used in therapeutic and educational settings (Bagilishya, Drapeau, Heusch, Lacroix, & Rousseau, 2005). Although art therapy can be beneficialto students of all kind, it has primarily been investigated while being implemented in special education programs with students of various learning disabilities. Some of the most commonly mentioned benefits of art therapy are self-esteem, self-expression, problem solving, and conflict resolution (Bagilishya et al. 2005). With a growing popularity, art therapy has been used as an intervention tool in classrooms to promote positive social skills, increased academic achievement and expression of emotions.

Research indicates that the majority of children with emotional difficulties also have learning disabilities (Freilich & Shectman, 2010). The emotional difficulties may include social and interpersonal skills, as well as self-esteem concerns. Many studies (Adu-Agyem, 2009; Bagilishya et al, 2005; Dorff & Pochedley, 2008; Dunn-Snow, 1999; Naumburg, 2001) have investigated the link between art making in the classroom setting and increased self-esteem. Naumburg (2001) states that art can be employed in education as a means of orientation and deeper self-knowledge. She points out that “creating images” has been a basic mode of communication for man since primeval times.” The power of symbolic visual communication is so vital to self-expression and now educators are able to encourage such communication through art practices. Many theorists, (Naumburg, 2001; Nisenson, 2008) believe that art is a mirror into the personality of a child. This may be portrayed through colors, textures, shapes and rhythm. Art produced by an individual can reflect one’s personality while creating a vehicle for which internal change can occur (Nisenson, 2008). When a student or patient is encouraged to express their unconscious thought and feelings through visual projections, they are utilizing the constant reservoir within that is the main source of creative expression. Whether the finished piece has artistic merit or not, the act of creating in and of itself, can be therapeutic and therefore beneficial to the student. In addition to benefitting the student, art therapy has been known to increase the level of communication between the pupil and the teacher (Naumburg, 2001). By forming bonds and establishing positive relationships, the student is perhaps more inclined to feel comfortable expressing feelings and communicating with the teacher. Teachers of children with special needs are typically well versed in empathetic communication and many have even had to develop an alternative to verbal communication, especially those working with children with autism (Osbourne, 2003). Obsourne (2003) contends that during the art therapy process, the task for both the teacher and student is “reading the language of each other, or a conversational exchange.” This reinforces the idea of the dynamic shift between the teacher and student when engaged in art. The art activities cannot be based on a transfer of knowledge, but rather a partnership in which people are engaged in a shared activity of making art. It is in that dynamic, that art education and art therapy become two different entities.

Art therapy can play a significant role in stimulating positive social skills and growth. A study reported by Adu-Agyem (2009), supports the notion that art can be used as a form of therapy and a non-verbal communication as well as a tool for enhancing children’s learning. According to Adu-Agyem (2008), learning is most effective when it links with emotional experience. Because of budgets cuts in many public schools, students have very limited exposure to the arts. The majority of subjects taught are linked with the logical side of the brain, which taps into verbal reasoning, organizing and sequencing. Art however, draws on the emotional side of the brain. It is essential for educators to fully realize the potential of the arts and its impact on developmental learning and creative expression. In addition, art can serve as a vehicle for problem solving and social development by facilitating interaction between children (Adu-Agyem, 2009; Balke, 1997; Siegesmund, 2002). This interaction can be seen through the communal use of art materials, for example. In terms of behavior modification, Adu-Agyem (2009) also states that “Education modifies behavior and art expresses self. Thus behavior can be modified through the use of art where this is understood as expression of a child's intellectual, artistic or creative and social life.” A child’s education needs to be one that supports their emotional needs in conjunction with their intellectual needs. By participating in the arts, students are not only allowed to express themselves in a way that “requires feeling and emotion” but also art can develop training in real-world skills such as time management, critical thinking and cooperative learning (Buenaflor, 2008) Many schools are now advocating the idea of cooperative learning. In special education settings, where children are often under emotional pressures, arts therapy would behoove those students who are seeking to express themselves in even the most crucial of circumstances (Frost, 2005; Furniss, 2008).

Children on the Autism spectrum have a critical need for participation in the arts (Furniss, 2008; Epp, 2008). Art therapy is believed to be appropriate for these children because they are visual thinkers. Art allows them to connect with a non-threatening subject that nurtures their learning styles. It also facilitates group work and self-exploration. Because children with Autism often lack conventional social skills, such as eye contact, the use of art therapy is a very popular tool in which to identify and use appropriate conversational skills.

Positive behavior changes have been noted in many studies (Henley, 1999; Mason, Steedy, & Thorman, 2008; Pace & Schwartz, 2008) that examined the efficacy of arts integration. Some of the advantages of arts-based instruction may be that the students have opportunities to make decisions for themselves while engaged in an art activity. In art, there is no “right” answer and that concept can be both comforting and non-threatening. Classrooms that foster creative activities are like cultural workshops where children are able to express their thoughts and feelings (Balke, 1997). Teachers that nurture creative play and exploration are doing a service to the children’s need to play. Many theorists (Balke, 1997; Germain, 2008) believe that art has the potential to assist special needs children in communicating with others and to obtain confidence in their own ideas. In terms of use within a special education setting, art therapy can accommodate an understanding of students’ own ideas, improve motor skills and help one solve problems in a way that is empowering. Art therapy interventions have been shown to be beneficial in special education classrooms because the they provided depth into the curriculum and increased student engagement while allowing greater freedom in instruction practice (Mason et al. 2008; Taylor, 2005). By modifying existing activities for students who cannot perform at the level of other students, differentiation can be implemented through art therapy as well (Vize, 2005). Because differentiation is a key component to lesson planning, art therapy can be a useful tool for teachers to use when determining the best possible way to for a special education student to learn. The students then feel the success of completing the activity rather than feeling less-than the other students because they were unable to finish the task.

Art therapy has been studied to determine its power to facilitate change (Pace & Schwartz, 2008; Osbourne, 2003; Waller, 2006). Although art therapy can be beneficial to students of all types, is can be most receptive by children with emotional, developmental and behavioral problems (Dunn-Snow, 1999). Fear of rejection is common reaction from children with emotional disturbances. However, while a child is engaged in art therapy he/she is able to understand that criticism and rejection are not forthcoming from the instructor and therefore art becomes a safe place for expression. Edith Kramer, the woman who pioneered the art therapy movement believes that art therapy has “inherent healing properties and that an art product could emerge out of destructive feelings, which would be a replacement for destructive behaviors and thus prevent them from being acted out” (Waller, 2006). Through the process of art making and the relationship a child forms with the therapist, the child is able to gain control over his/her feelings and in turn produce a change in behavior. A salient piece of evidence gathered from a study conducted by Henley (1999), is stated as, “aggressive or impulsive behaviors related to hyperactivity or social anxiety can be channeled and transformed into socially constructive forms of self-regulation through facilitated creative behavior.” If this is true, then art therapy should be implemented as a means for behavioral change in classrooms with special needs students.

The act of creating art has very powerful effects (Rufo, 2011). By allowing students more freedom and accountability when making art in the classroom, teachers can promote self-worth as an artist and foster self-esteem at the same time. Rufo (2011) recounts a time during one of his classes when he observed a student wrapping scotch tape around his finger during share time. At first, Rufo viewed this as simply a waste of time and supplies. When he questioned the student about he activity, he discovered that the student has actually created a “simple, yet witty contraption.” Had he disrupted this student during this activity, he could have invalidated the student’s creativity and possibly undermined his self-worth as an artist (Rufo, 2011). This is important for most teachers to understand in order to take on an empathetic viewpoint of art therapy. The teacher of art to special education students must have firsthand experience inside of the artistic process in order to fully understand the problems that students may face in their creative struggles (Ulman, 1992).

Although many studies have concluded that art therapy is an effective means for positive change, art therapy as a field, is constantly under pressure to prove its benefits by becoming more “evidence-based.”(Derby, 2011) In order to do this, first, an art therapist must establish what constitutes “evidence.” There lies a debate on this subject, as there are many different definitions to what “evidence” means. As with any scientific field, research is needed to prove its validity. Evidence to prove the efficacy of art therapy is lacking and therefore makes it the subject of ridicule. Derby (2011) contributes his thoughts on the problem within art education discourses and the way disability is perceived.

Art therapy allows children to solve problems visually and offers a non-threatening way to deal with rejection (Freilich & Shectman, 2010). If a student can participate in an arts activity on a daily basis, then perhaps their social skills and behavioral skills will increase as a result. In addition to its positive effects of the emotional well being of the child, teaching art can also serve as an opportunity to teach other subjects as well. Evidence suggests that the effects of art therapy on special education students are almost always positive.

Statement of the Hypothesis

By implementing art therapy practices to 15 first grade students at PS X in Brooklyn, NY for 45 minutes a day, 3 days a week, for 6 weeks, students will increase their on-task behavior and positive social skills.

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